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CH'AN NEWSLETTER

No. 15 August 1981

IS PRACTICE NECESSARY?

In America as well as in the East there are still many people who have mistaken notions about Ch'an, because of the widespread view that Ch'an just emphasizes "direct pointing to the mind" and dispenses with all methods of cultivation. Two different misconceptions may result from this viewpoint: The first is that one doesn't need to practice because everyone is originally Buddha, and is already enlightened. The second is that, yes, we do have to practice, but all that is required is to just sit there, sit there, sit there. A story from the early records of the Ch'an school in China illustrates this second misconception. Ma-tsu Tao-i spent a lot of time in sitting meditation. One day his master, Nan-yüeh Huai-jang, came over to him and started rubbing a brick. Tao-i asked, "Why are you rubbing a brick?" Huai-jang replied, "I am rubbing it until it becomes a mirror." Tao-i said, "That's strange. I never heard that rubbing a brick could make it into a mirror." Whereupon the master turned around and said, "And I never heard that by (constantly) sitting one can become a Buddha."

It is impossible that one can attain enlightenment merely by sitting. But even more unlikely than that is the idea that without any practice at all one is naturally the Buddha, in the state of enlightenment. Nevertheless, there are many people who believe in this first misconception that not being enlightened is just enlightenment itself, and accordingly, there is no need to practice. A lot of people believe in this theory because it is such an easy path. For a period of time in America young bohemians took the free and easy lifestyle of Han Shan (Cold Mountain) as the spirit of Ch'an. Buddhism terms this type of practice "the natural outer path." You should know that the true practice of Ch'an follows a definite course with a basis and various ascending levels, each with its own accompanying method.

(excerpted from a lecture given by Master Sheng-Yen at Columbia Univ. on Apr. 24, 1981)

HOT AND COLD

Everyone is most comfortable in cool or moderate temperatures, neither extremely hot nor extremely cold. Our practice should be the same; not too hot and not too cold. That is, you shouldn't be overanxious to get rid of vexations or to seek wisdom, and on the other hand, you shouldn't take it easy and be lax in the practice. This is called

"the Middle Way."

In the Buddhist Sutras, coolness corresponds to wisdom and heat to vexations. However, extreme cold also represents vexations. There are two categories of hells - some are boiling hot and some are freezing cold. What is hell? Hell is the place of suffering, and suffering means vexations. Our objective is to replace vexations (caused either by overanxiety or laxity) with the cool refreshment of wisdom.

Is there really such a thing as heat and cold? That is to say, does hell, or suffering, really exist? Depending on our mental state, you could say that there really is and you could also say that there really isn't. When you feel subject to vexations then heat and cold are very real. When you don't feel any vexations then heat and cold simply disappear, along with the hells. Most people are afraid to fall into hell and desire to go up to heaven. But in reality both of them are vexations, just as dreading cold or heat amounts to the same thing. So if you get to heaven out of a desire for happiness, that happiness will also be a vexation. Therefore, we can't have one without the other. If hell exists, heaven also exists. But when your mind is free of vexations both the hells and the heavens would cease to exist. Thus from the standpoint of Ch'an, there is no heaven, no hell, no Buddha, and no sentient beings. That is to say, there are no vexations.

But, based on this view that there is no hell and no heaven, if you say you don't have any vexations, that is also a vexation! Any person who feels the presence or absence of vexations is not qualified to say there is no heaven or hell, nor is he qualified to say there are no sentient beings and no Buddha. In the Vimalakirti Sutra we find that if your mind is pure, and without vexations, the land you are living in would also be pure, and absent of vexations. Then would there be any heat or cold in that land? At that time, cold is just heat, heat is just cold, vexations are just wisdom, and sentient beings are just the Buddha.

But now, no matter what I may say, it's obviously very hot in this meditation hall. Should we deceive ourselves by saying it's not hot while we're sweating and fainting from the heat? And in the winter, when this place becomes very drafty, should we deny that it's freezing cold? Heat is just heat and cold is just cold. How can we say that there is no such thing? Are the sutras trying to deceive people by saying that cold is hot and hot is cold?

No, the sutras are not deceiving us. It is only when our mind is scattered and hasn't settled down yet that we feel the changes in temperature. When our mind is in a unified state and does not wander outwards, we have already forgotten the existence of our body and bodily sensations, that is, we don't feel environmental factors such as temperature impinging on our body; then at that point we would be naturally qualified to say that there is no such thing as hot or cold. It would not even occur in our minds.

(Short talk given by Master Sheng-Yen during Sunday meditation activities on
July 12, 1981)

NEWS ITEMS

Shih-fu Sheng-Yen left for Taiwan on July 26. He will return to New York on Oct. 22. During his stay on Taiwan this time, in addition to his regular Dharma responsibilities which includes holding Ch'an retreats, Dharma assemblies and lectures, and university teaching, Shih-fu will open and begin accepting students at the new Research Institute of Buddhist Studies at Chinese Culture University.

On July 26 the Institute of Chung-Hwa Buddhist Culture held its second annual membership meeting at the Ch'an Center, which was well attended by both members and non-members. Reports were given reviewing the past year and plans for the future. Three newly elected members of the Board of Trustees were Irene Liu, James Dowiat, and Robert Sperling (the Board consists of seven members in all).

Comings and Goings: Bhiksu Kuo-Jen has left the Ch'an Center for a period of up to a year to visit and study at other Buddhist centers around the United States.

A new permanent resident is Mrs. Yoo, originally from Taiwan, who gave up living in a beautiful country home in Connecticut with her daughter and grandchildren, to practice Buddhism here at the Ch'an Center. Mrs. Yoo, who speaks four languages and is an expert seamstress, has impressed everybody with her humbleness, warmth, and sincerity, and all agree that she will be a great asset to the Center. So far, the vegetable garden has seen a marked uplift under her careful attention.

Based on the big success of the last Hatha Yoga class taught by Shakti, the Ch'an Center is offering a second class, which started on August 18, for five consecutive Tuesday evenings.

Sunday is an "open house" for all visitors. The schedule of activities is as follows:

- A.M. 10:00 Chanting Buddhist Sutras in Chinese (transliterations provided for non-Chinese)
- 11:30 Midday Offering
- P.M. 12:00 Vegetarian Lunch (\$1 donation)
- 1:00 Discussion on topics related to meditation practice and Buddhism led by Ch'an Center members or invited guest speakers
- 2:30 Meditation activities (free instruction for newcomers)
- 5:00 Evening Service

In addition to the regular Sunday afternoon meditation, group sittings are now being held at the Ch'an Center on Wednesday evenings 7:30 to 9:30 and on Sunday mornings from 9:00 to 10:30.

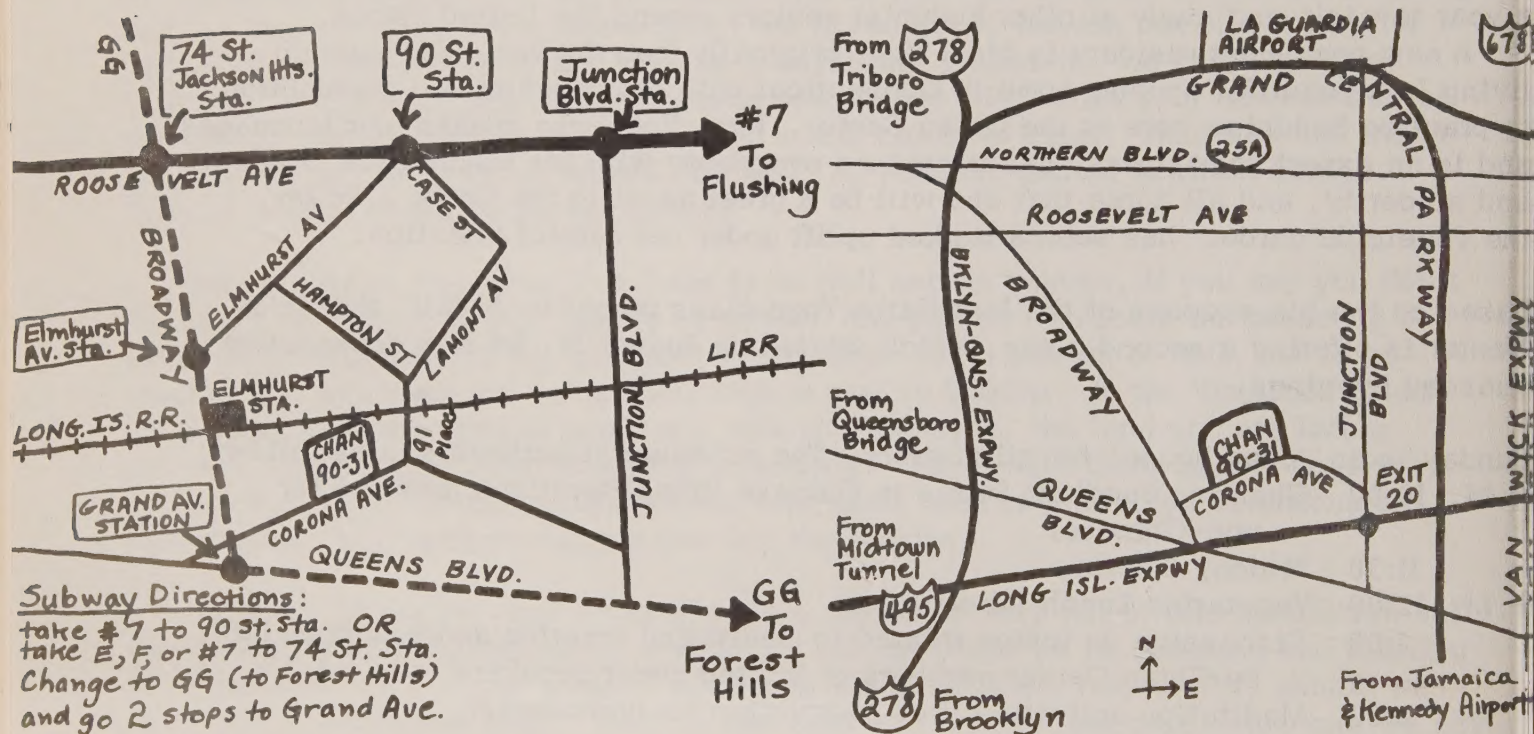
A special celebration of the Chinese Mid-Autumn Festival will be held on Saturday evening, September 12. Everyone is welcome to join in the festivities.

For more information on Ch'an Center activities, phone (212) 592-6593, or write:

Ch'an Meditation Center
90-31 Corona Avenue
Elmhurst, N.Y. 11373

The maintenance of our center and its activities depend upon contributions from members and friends. If you would like to help support us, any effort will be greatly appreciated. Those interested in offering time and labor may call the center at (212) 592-6593. Anyone who may wish to contribute financially, please make your check payable to the Institute of Chung-Hwa Buddhist Culture, and mail to the address given below. Your donation is tax-deductible.

Of course, we encourage everyone to visit and participate in our activities.



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